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DEMOCRATIC FORCES IN RUSSIA

BY MANYA GORDON STRUNSKY

Now that the Bolshevik experiment in Russia, according to the confession of the experimenters themselves, has broken down, it is of importance to ask if there are forces in Russia outside of the Bolshevik ranks upon whom we may base our hopes of a reconstruction of the national life. By this I do not mean what are the chances of a political revolution against the Bolshevik *régime*, but what are the capacities of the Russian people for real self-rule as distinguished from the autocracy of Czarism on the one hand and the autocracy of Bolshevism on the other.

The question is important because of the nature of the propaganda directed against the Russian people by their present masters through the medium of distinguished "observers" from abroad. When the legend of Bolshevik progress and Bolshevik democracy had been pretty well shattered, when the misery of the Russian people under Bolshevik rule could no longer be concealed, the rulers at Moscow bethought themselves of a new defense. Bad as conditions were in Russia, ran the argument, they would be worse if not for the Bolshevik control. True though it was that Bolshevism was not a democracy but a dictatorship, this dictatorship was the only thing that stood between the Russian people and utter dissolution. In other words the Russian people cannot take care of itself. It is predestined for despotism.

Perhaps with the best intentions in the world, men like Mr. H. G. Wells and Mr. Bertrand Russell lent themselves to this slander against the Russian people. Mr. Wells felt that for Russia it must be either the Bolsheviki or a relapse into Asiatic barbarism. Mr. Russell felt that the Bolsheviki were needed to "energize" a naturally slothful and unenterprising population. No apologist for Czarism in the old days stressed so emphatically the traditional stupidity, ignorance, and brute fatalism of the *mujik*. In order to justify the Bolshevik experiment these

foreign observers deemed it necessary to popularize the picture of the Russian peasant as a sub-human being who must be saved against himself from famine, typhus, idleness, illiteracy and general degradation.

If this were true, then indeed there would be only reason for regretting the obvious breakdown of the Bolshevik system. But the findings of men like Russell and Wells are far from the truth. They approached their task in deep ignorance of Russian history, of the life and aspirations of the Russian peasantry, and, an important item, of the Russian language. Why, under such handicaps, they should have proceeded to analyze the aspirations and capacities of the Russian people with such enthusiasm is rather curious, but perhaps no longer important. What is important is that from Bolshevik sources now comes a sharp refutation of Wells and Russell.

Coupled with the now famous phrases regarding the reëstablishment of capitalism there has been coming out of Moscow with great frequency another term, "decentralization". The reins of the bureaucracy are being loosened. The Bolshevik rulers are finding that after all the Russian people have capacities for self-management. There is much testimony from newspaper correspondents now in Russia that wherever outside of Moscow and Petrograd the dead hand has been lifted from local initiative, the Russian people are displaying energy and resourcefulness in coping with the miseries of famine and economic dissolution, whereas Moscow and Petrograd "are worse governed than one would suppose possible".

Under these circumstances I think it will be of service to go back a few years into the history of the Russian people, and to cast a glance over certain pre-Bolshevik popular institutions from which one will derive a truer picture of Russia's capacity for democracy and progress than Mr. Wells was able to obtain in the course of his ten days' visit to Moscow; institutions such as the Mir or village commune, the Zemstvo, and the Coöperatives. These have suffered under the Bolshevik *régime*. But they are destined to play their part in the reconstruction of the country.

"What the Mir has settled is God's own judgment," is a common proverb among peasants. And before the Bolsheviks seized

control it was also an accurate expression of the power of the Mir. If asked to define the Mir a peasant would be likely to reply, "All for one and one for all, that is the Mir." Could any statement convey a higher sense of authority than the first adage, or a higher degree of fraternity than the second? The Mir reaches back into the time of serfdom, when the serfs of each household cultivated in common the land assigned to them for their use. Under the direction of the elected elders of the Mir, the peasants ventured to assert themselves against the landowner. If the master so willed, they were all flogged, but they held together.

Abolition of serfdom in 1861 did not change greatly the peasant mode of life. The Act of Emancipation, in giving legal status to the Mir, was mindful of the government's interest in the business. It made sure of the peasants' paying the heavy redemption taxes for the land they received by making the Mir responsible for the taxes of every member. This made the Mir even more a unit than it was before emancipation. The Act of Emancipation forbade any peasant to withdraw from the Mir without the consent of three-fourths of the members. To be sure, the Mir would not have endured if the reason for its existence had been the collection of taxes only. The Mir was cemented by the poverty of the peasants. General destitution, for example, made the individual ownership of agricultural implements impossible.

But whatever the special condition that helped to perpetuate the Mir, it is certain that its roots were deep in the native life. Its solidarity was basic. Even the unwelcome tax-collector learned after awhile to take a warning from the familiar adage, "If the Mir gives a whoop, the forest will groan and bend."

The Mir was the only truly agrarian institution in Russia. Unlike the Soviet, it was not political. It had to do with the business of the soil only. In a meeting of the Mir only the peasants belonging to the commune participated. Each person present was familiar with the soil and the needs of the village. Dictators or Commissars were unknown, and the will of the majority was supreme. Mutual intercourse and good understanding formed a bond among the peasants. Economic necessity, the common need of the communal resources, of implements and other agricultural accessories, held them together as nothing else could.

The story of agrarian reforms from the year 1905 to 1912 furnishes an excellent illustration of the deep-rooted nature of the rural commune. Revolutionary propaganda had made the Mir unpopular in Government circles. Nicholas II became anxious concerning the familiar argument of the Socialist Revolutionists, that the Mir is the cornerstone of Socialism in Russia. A serious attempt was made by the Government to break up the solidarity of the Mir. This was arrested by the World War. Absolute need of collective effort among the Allies everywhere and the shortage of agricultural supplies in Russia helped to strengthen peasant faith in the communal principle. There arose, as a result of the war, a special scarcity of agricultural necessities in Russia. The maintenance of production was made possible because of the collective ownership of the Mir. Through careful distribution, each peasant taking his turn, every implement was made to do the work that would have engaged many machines under individual ownership.

Then came the Bolshevik revolution and destroyed the communal solidarity of the Mir. Agrarian Russia was not ready for private ownership. Lenin, the Communist, accomplished that which the autocracy of Nicholas II desired but did not know how to effect. He was not preoccupied with the peasant. Autocrat of a proletarian republic, his real mission was to eradicate the bourgeoisie, socialize industrial Russia, and bring about a world revolution. He was not concerned with the land issue. But the peasants clamored for attention, and to keep them quiet while Lenin was attending to the real business of the State, the Bolsheviks threw the land to them.

The peasants proceeded to do as they liked. It was a scramble. Peasants who had land adjoining a large estate dislodged the owner and divided the land and agricultural supplies, not among the villagers of the Mir, but among the few peasants whose land happened to be nearest to the estate. Peasants whose allotments were situated in a remote part of the village had nothing to grab. These became, as a result of the loss in communal tools and supplies, poorer than they were before the Bolsheviks got into power. The Bolsheviks made no effort to meet the requirements of the impoverished peasants or to appease the strife in the village.

which their failure to socialize the land or, at least, to effect an equitable distribution, created.

Through the collapse of industrial life in the cities, the Bolsheviks further separated the peasant from his chances of a livelihood. The Russian winter is long. Formerly a vast number of the poorer peasants were in the habit of adding to their meagre earnings by finding employment in the cities. But complete prostration of industrial Russia as a result of Bolshevik rule deprived the peasant of the opportunity of winter employment. Thus, the lack of manufactured goods was not the only hardship which the collapse of the city industries brought upon the poor peasant. It also deprived him of remunerative work without which he could not hope to secure agricultural tools or keep his family fed. Those peasants who gained little or nothing from the division of the land suffered greatly from the loss of the communal supplies and the lack of opportunity to eke out their budget by winter earnings.

The presence of Lenin's "poorer peasantry" in the village became another source of irritation to the peasants. Lenin's "poorer peasantry" consisted of those who, taking advantage of the conditions created by the reforms of the years 1905-1912, sold their land, withdrew from the Mir, and lost their money either through misfortune or drink. In order to gain a livelihood these peasants were compelled to return to the village. They were forced to become agricultural wage workers. As such they came under the patronage of Lenin. Out of these were organized the village soviets as well as the famous "Committees of the Poor". The business of the Committees of the Poor was to secure forced requisitions of food. These *bosaki* (tramps, as they are commonly called by the peasants) terrorized poor and prosperous peasants alike and earned the hatred of both. The peasants would have submitted to any plan for the distribution of food that was put forth by the Mir or village. But they refused to take orders from above.

The presence of the poorer peasantry in the village in the form of Bolshevik pillars of society became a permanent cause of civil war. In order to assert themselves they had to be more vicious and arbitrary than the servants of Nicholas II ever dared to be.

But it must be admitted that they did not find the peasant an easy prey. We learn from some of the Bolshevik official reports that the peasants did not hesitate occasionally to bury alive a particularly obnoxious Commissar. These reports were of course not meant to be taken as indictments of Bolshevik management in rural Russia. They were intended to convey the difficulty of communizing the peasants. But they offer a real glimpse into village life under Bolshevism until Lenin experienced a change of heart and abandoned his "Committees of the Poor" and his entire programme of civil war in the village.

There are other difficulties that beset the peasants who secured possession of the land. Their most serious discontent arose from the very method of acquisition. After the first proud flush of ownership disappeared they began to doubt their right to the land. Having no confidence in the Soviet Government, they besought the previous owners to come to some settlement. The peasants were even willing to pay the ejected landowner for a formal statement to the effect that the land was really theirs. Unwilling to commit themselves, the expelled owners insisted that the land was no longer theirs to give. To this the peasants replied that they had no faith in Bolshevik-made laws. Thus the peasants are still uncertain as to their title to the land and they hold the Bolsheviks accountable for this condition.

Aside from the question of ownership, the peasants have been unable to derive any gain from their new holdings. They have neither the implements, seeds or fertilizers with which to make their holdings really profitable. As a consequence of Bolshevik confusion and incompetence even those peasants who acquired more land have derived much less profit from their considerable acquisitions than they did from the trivial grants received under the reforms of 1905-1912. At that time, with the aid and sympathy of the Zemstvos and Coöperatives, the peasants proceeded to exploit these small gains in land. One can scarcely recall a period in Russian history when the agrarian population was more energetic or hopeful. This newly awakened consciousness in the peasant was reflected in the spread of education and in the improved agricultural and industrial life in the village. That was under the Czar. As things stand to-day, Bolshevik failure

to socialize the land has crippled the Mir, forced private ownership in the village, and so created an army of poor peasants whose only hope of relief can come from a reconsideration of the entire land question. Had the land been distributed according to the recommendations of the commission created by the Provisional Government of Kerensky and made legal by the Constituent Assembly, each peasant would have received his right allotment of land and with the aid of the communal resources of the Mir would have put it to the best use.

The dissolution of the Zemstvos or provincial assemblies had the same crushing effect upon the nation that the breaking up of the Mir had upon the village. The Zemstvos were the lineal descendants of the Assemblies of the Nobles created by Catherine II. The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the legal organization of the Mir destroyed the nobles' monopoly of representation in the assemblies. In the Zemstvos, as created in 1864, three distinct classes were gathered—the nobles, the peasants or members of the Mir, and the town merchants, or urban property owners. Henceforth the peasants sat and deliberated with the nobles and so touched shoulders with their former masters. The Zemstvos were meant to unite the three classes, not to eradicate them, so as to form a body of national welfare. As such they fully justified their existence.

The Zemstvos first directed their attention towards the improvement of roads and rural conditions generally. In time their activities took on a broader aspect, but up to their dissolution by the Bolsheviki they never lost sight of the needs of the agricultural population. Under the autocracy, especially during the last twenty years, every civic improvement and progressive measure was sponsored and fought for by the Zemstvos. With the exception of the Mir there was not an institution in Russia which was more respected or readily supported by the people. Apart from their interest in good roads and other improvements in the village, they introduced fire insurance into rural Russia, and so relieved the peasant of one of his worst burdens. They levied and regulated taxes, encouraged and maintained public charities, and nominated the justices of peace. But whatever their success in these important spheres it cannot be compared

with their two most notable achievements: education and public health.

To understand the importance of the Zemstvo medical service it is not enough to visualize the significance of our own departments of public health. Whereas in this country every effort in this field has been aided and sustained by the Government, in Russia it was quite the contrary. The autocracy gave little attention and still less money to the public health or medical institutions. So until the Zemstvos began to apply themselves seriously to the problem, doctors or drug stores were practically non-existent in rural Russia. That is, 85 per cent of the population of 120,000,000 souls were dependent on quacks or home remedies. It must not be assumed that the Zemstvos at any time succeeded in keeping pace with the vast demand. As late as 1910, according to a statement by Dr. Julius Halpern in *The Quarterly* of the Federation of States Medical Board of the United States, there was in Russia only one man and woman physician for every 1,500 town residents and 24,700 rural inhabitants.

Physicians however are not the only medical practitioners in Russia. The bulk of medical relief, health education and enforcement of sanitation was carried on by the *feldsher*, and nearly always by the Zemstvo *feldsher*, who can be described as a Zemstvo creation. He is, according to Dr. Halpern, "a cross between our nurse and junior house staff." The requirements for entrance into the *feldsher* schools varied from four years of high school to a complete course which is eight years. But sometimes the more able students of the elementary schools were admitted. For women the standard was higher. The training of this auxiliary medical staff was at the expense of the Zemstvos. A student who completed a four-year course at the Zemstvo school or other school which included three years of Latin, general education and medical instruction, received the degree of *feldsher*. In 1911 there were in Russia 26,184 *feldshers*. Of these 16,392 practiced in rural districts. They were associated with the central county hospitals or the small hospitals in the precincts. No detailed account of the varied activities and enormous usefulness of these men and women is possible. Dr. Halpern maintains that "there is nowhere in Russia, nor for that matter in the world,

a class of more devoted, hard-working, self-sacrificing, altruistic and public-spirited people than the Russian medical men and women, especially the Zemstvo medical workers. They are the truest friends and advisers of the people in the vast Russian backwoods."

To the American reader Dr. Halpern's statement, though authoritative, might seem somewhat partial. But a Russian familiar with the work of the Zemstvo physician or *feldsher* cannot conceive rural Russia without them. To appreciate their services to the masses one must visualize a Russian village during the winter. Buried in snow, nearly every hut contains a patient. A visit to any village would reveal the Zemstvo *feldsher* plodding through the snow either in a sleigh or on foot, in the most bitter cold, bent upon service. At the bedside of a patient no duty was too humiliating or disagreeable. He did the work of an orderly whenever it was necessary, and was the source of continual information for the peasant woman in her special problems. In an emergency or serious illness the people could turn to the Zemstvo practitioner at any hour of the night. He was humble in service. He was forever on the alert for transient or visiting physicians. A physician who happened to make a one-night stop in a village, on a visit to friends or relatives, scarcely ever escaped the zeal of the Zemstvo *feldsher*, who was immediately on his trail. Together they would visit the more serious cases in the district. This passionate devotion to duty and ever readiness to serve was the normal characteristic of the Russian medical practitioner.

This is the institution which collapsed as a result of the dissolution of the Zemstvos. And here again the Bolshevik skill of destruction was thorough. Mr. H. G. Wells and others have told us of the miserable plight of the Russian men of science. But we have still to learn the effect of Bolshevik humanity and enlightenment upon the great body of Russia's rural intellectual leaders and upon the health service of the country. Bolshevik Russia is indeed in need of drugs. But the lack of foreign drugs is not the only cause of her deplorable health conditions. First war and then the devastating work of the Bolsheviks among the Zemstvo health and medical centres are the real reasons. We

have heard much concerning Bolshevik socialization, education, drama, art, etc., but nothing about what they have done to public health. Not daring to reveal the deplorable effect of their policy they discuss only the blockade and the resultant lack of drug imports. The peasant knows better.

The Soviet rulers have fascinated well-meaning foreign visitors with the story of their new educational experiments. Much has been said about the Commissar of Education, Lunacharsky, and his proletarian version of *Faust*, as if the right interpretation of *Faust* was all that the Russian people needed in their struggle for knowledge. It has escaped the general public that under these picturesque experiments of the Bolsheviki lie buried the aspirations of the Russian people towards universal elementary education. Whatever comfort the Soviet press or sympathizers can derive from their elaborate educational tracts, these mean nothing to the Russian people. In this as in all their repressive measures the Bolsheviki are not original. They were anticipated by the Romanoffs. Nicholas II and his kin before him, like the Bolsheviki, had records of hundreds of schools which on investigation were found to be on paper only. This may be news to the foreigner but it is common knowledge among Russians, especially among the peasants.

Russians are not enthusiastic over the Bolshevik educational innovations because they conceal the real issue—the Bolshevik failure to introduce compulsory elementary education. The progress made by the Zemstvos and other civic organizations during the last twenty years indicated that even had Nicholas II continued in power, the people would have soon reached the objective of a general system of elementary instruction. In education as in health the Zemstvos were the most energetic workers in the country. Their struggle against illiteracy is one of the most inspiring chapters in Russian history. Harassed continually by the antagonistic attitude of the Czarist Government, impeded by the sectarian efforts of the poverty-stricken clergy, the Zemstvos kept rigidly to their task. The results of their persistent efforts can best be illustrated by the following figures:

In 1880 only 8 per cent of all the children between the ages of eight and fourteen attended school. As a result of the untiring

work of the Zemstvos as well as other mass organizations, but notably the Zemstvos, the rate of attendance in 1911 mounted to 44 per cent and three years later it reached 51 per cent. The educational budget under the autocracy furnishes another example of the peasants' yearning for elementary schools. In 1900 the entire expenditure for elementary education was about 50 million rubles, of which the government supplied only 10.3 millions. On the other hand, the Zemstvos contributed 11.4 millions; village associations 8.3 millions; cities 6.9 millions; private individuals 6.7 millions; and tuition fees 3.1 millions. In reading these figures one must bear in mind the poverty of the Russian village. The Zemstvo provinces have always led in education. In 1898 the number of army recruits from Zemstvo districts who could read and write was 59 per cent, whereas literacy in non-Zemstvo provinces was only 36.3 per cent. During the twenty years from 1878 to 1898 literacy in Zemstvo provinces increased threefold, while in non-Zemstvo regions it had less than doubled.

This is the work of education and these are the organs of popular upliftment that were undone when the Bolsheviki destroyed the Zemstvos.

The eradication of the Mir and the Zemstvos is not the only offense for which the Russian masses hold the Bolsheviki accountable. The Bolshevik passion for destruction has been thorough. It has not spared the most potent factor in Russia's economic life next after the tilling of the soil itself. The Bolsheviki attempted to destroy the coöperative societies. There is no need to write of the Coöperatives at great length because on this subject the American public has been well and copiously instructed of late.

In Russia, before the Bolshevik hurricane struck her, everything pointed towards the triumph of the principle of coöperation. The advent of the Bolsheviki found more than half of the enormous population organized in some form of consumers', producers' or credit associations. In 1917, there were 20,000 consumers' societies and 8,020 village coöperative societies as against only 522 urban coöperatives. Again it is demonstrated that the peasant had kept pace with the city worker in his communal

interests. The rapid development of the consumers' societies in the village stimulated the establishment of credit associations. There were two coöperative credit associations in Russia. The Loan and Saving societies were more popular among small trades people because every borrower was required to be also a subscriber. But the Credit Associations, on the other hand, did not require any subscription and were for that reason more prevalent among the peasants. In 1916 there were in Russia 11,768 of these credit associations and 4,239 loan saving societies with a membership of 10,000,000 householders. Apart from advancing money and receiving deposits the credit associations acted also as purchasing agencies. The members contributed 470,000,000 rubles to their aggregate capital of 800,000,000.

But these were not the only coöperative organizations in Russia which the Bolsheviki set out to destroy. They demolished such national institutions as the Union of Coöperative Credit Societies, the Union of Coöperative Consumers' Societies, and the Union of Coöperative Wholesale Societies. The last named was concerned with the supply of agricultural and other implements and the finding of markets for agricultural and manufactured products. These organizations were centred in the Moscow Marodny Bank (People's Bank) in which 85 per cent of the 4,000 shareholders were the coöperative societies. According to J. V. Bubnoff, "the leaders of these societies were mostly peasants, sometimes illiterate, who had the assistance of a bookkeeper." These mass organizations have been the very arteries of agricultural productivity and industrial endeavor. Their dissolution was to complete the Bolshevik scheme of national disintegration. But before the destruction of the coöperatives could be effected, the present Bolshevik change of heart had set in.

Such is a brief survey of mass effort for economic and social progress in Russia to which it will be useful to turn in following up the liquidation of Bolshevism and in speculating on the permanent future of the Russian people.

MANYA GORDON STRUNSKY.